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Review of "Underclass: a history of the excluded since 1880" by John Welshman

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Underclass: a history of the excluded since 1880 2nd ed.

By John Welshman

Bloomsbury: London (2013). ISBN 978-1-78093-570-6 (pbk)

In 2011 David Cameron announced his quest to identify and change the behaviour of '120,000 troubled families'. Social researchers and social work professionals have struggled to find many families which meet Cameron's criteria. When they do find families with multiple problems, it is difficult to disentangle causes and effects of poverty and deprivation and the solutions are much more complex than current government rhetoric would suggest. In this book John Welshman shows us that this is not new. Terms such as 'underclass', 'problem families', 'unemployables', 'socially excluded' are all terms which have been used across the last century to describe and problematize social groups at the sharp end of social policies. Welshman updates his 2006 first edition of this book to include the 'troubled families' debate, showing how, once again, policy discourse and social research do not match up.

Charting the history of the changing concept from its origins in the deserving and undeserving poor of the nineteenth century, Welshman shows us that there have been many continuities, both in the kinds of people targeted by this discourse and in the proposed policy solutions. Welshman argues that there have been 'at least nine reconstructions' of the concept over the twentieth century (p229). Alleged social problems explained by the underclass concept have varied over time and include poverty, crime, unemployment, low levels of education, 'problem' parenting, illegitimacy, mental illness, drug and alcohol use and marital breakdown. Welshman argues that the thread linking these different uses of the concept is a principle that individual behaviour is the main problem. Sometimes there has been a punitive assault on individuals, combined with attempts to modify deviant behaviour. At other times there has been a recognition that deviant behaviour may have structural causes. Even when structural explanations for social problems have been given, the

strong moral thread running through the discourse has been on changing the behaviour of deviant groups. This discourse speaks to a populist faith in individual agency which is not supported by social research.

The book takes a chronological approach with detailed chapters covering key periods of social research and policy reform. It starts with the social surveys of the late nineteenth century and the social reformers of the 1900s, with their concept of 'unemployables' and what to do about them. Moving on to the 1920s and 1930s, a chapter discusses the concept of the 'social problem group' and its links with eugenics. In the 1940s Welshman identifies the 'problem families' alleged by middle class women observing the evacuation of poor children from the cities to the countryside. In the post-war period the development of social policies, the rise of social work and the expansion of social research often led to a focus on economic deprivation as a structural explanation for social problems. However there was a continuing concern amongst policy makers about the 'culture of poverty' during the 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s and early 1980s and the rise of the new right brought the emergence of 'cycles of deprivation' theories and, of course, Charles Murray's influential 'underclass'. Although concerned primarily with policy and discourse in the United Kingdom, at this point the book moves to a focus on the United States, providing a useful comparison and showing how race has been such an important part of the debate on the other side of the Atlantic. The book closes with chapters on New Labour and 'social exclusion' and the most recent version of the concept: the Coalition's 'troubled family'. This chronological approach provides detailed discussion of each historical period, looking at both public policy discourse and social research. Unsurprisingly the two do not often connect: policy makers tend to emphasise behavioural explanations for social problems while researchers tend to see structural explanations. At times, Welshman argues, policy makers attempt to use research to provide 'policy based evidence' to support their arguments (p224). While this exploration of the connection between policy and research is thought-provoking, it is the discussion of the evolution of the concept which is most useful.

Welshman's focus throughout is on policy and research but the underclass concept affects the lives of real people. From time to time he provides a glimpse into the lives of those on the receiving end of the discourse through the lense of enlightened

social researchers or the testimony of social workers. It is not a major criticism of the book that he does not provide more of this. Welshman's detailed discussion of the evolution of an idea illustrates strikingly why discourse is so important in framing social policies. For those people caught up in the moralising net of underclass theory, it is vital that researchers and policy analysts provide critical assessments exposing its inconsistencies and lack of empirical base. Welshman's book does just that.

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